

Speech by KZN Health MEC Neliswa Nkonyeni on the occasion of the Provincial Nehawu Conference at Coastland in Durban

June 17, 2008

All protocol observed

Revolutionary greetings to all the compatriots

My deepest appreciation to all of you for having included this very important item of HIV and AIDS firmly in your agenda.

I have to remind you that as a country, in April, we celebrated the 57th World Health Day under the theme; **“Invest in health, build a safer future.”**

Today I am glad that as health practitioners at differing levels we are able to invest time deliberating the issue of this epidemic that continue to course havoc even within our fold. As the most progressive formation I consider you to be the relevant partners in creating an AIDS free generation.

The new leadership that this conference will elect must know that our Department is taking cognizance of the seriousness and severity of this malady and the resultant multiple effects it has at all levels.

Kuyazwela kakhulu kithina uma kuqhubeka kuhamba emhlabeni laba esithembele kubo ukuthi bazosibhekela, basisingathele iziguli zethu. Kuqeda ithemba nakuzo iziguli.

As a Department whose core business is the rendition of health care to the public at large, our first responsibility then lies with our personnel in as far as having clear cut workplace-based response with regard to HIV and AIDS.

Without fail, we are expected to:

- Maintain employees in a state of wellness so as to ensure continuity of quality service delivery
- Provide appropriate treatment, care and support to all employees infected and affected by HIV and AIDS
- Ensure the protection of rights of employees, and
- Maintain confidentiality regarding an employee's status whilst fostering a supporting environment that encourages disclosure.

Our progressive organized labour, in this regard, has a responsibility to critically monitor and evaluate the programmes that are initiated so as to ensure that the desired end-points are obtained. We have to acknowledge that worldwide HIV and AIDS infect mostly those between 15 and 49– the age group that makes up the vast majority of the workforce, from Managers to General Assistants.

As employees you need to see to it that in every workplace there are clearly defined directorates whose sole responsibility is the provision of:

- HIV and AIDS programme in the Workplace
- Employee Assistance Programme
- Occupational Health and Safety, as well as
- Gender Focal Point

Already in place, in our situation, is the structure of Employee Health and Wellness Programme which was developed and approved for implementation by our National Minister of Health in 2006. This programme is mandated by The Occupational Health and Safety Act, 85 of 1993.

Accordingly all our institutions are expected to employ an Occupational Health Nurse to take care of all Health Care Workers in an institution. These nurses are expected to give full and comprehensive medical support to our Staff or personnel. We have to ensure that whatever service that is rendered to the members of the Public is made available to our Staff members through this (Occupational Health Clinic) Wellness Centre as it known.

Another Primary function is to put our Health Care Workers under medical Surveillance as Required by the Occupational Health and

Safety Act. Once any member of Staff has been diagnosed with a Chronic Disease (including HIV and AIDS) it is the duty of the Department through the Wellness (Occupational Health Clinic) Clinic to give that employee full Health Support in the same mode as it is given to the members of the Public.

As progressive labour, we thus have a responsibility to see to it that stipulations of the Labour Law are followed to the letter if our personnel get exposed whilst carrying out their duties. We need ensure that laws enacted work in our favour especially those that clearly state that:

- that an employee may be compensated if he or she becomes infected with HIV as a result of an occupational incident, in terms of the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act;
- that employers should take reasonable steps to assist employees with the application for benefits, including:
 - (i) providing information to affected employees on the procedures that will need to be followed in order to qualify for a compensation claim; and.
 - (ii) Assisting with the collection of information which will assist with proving that the employee were occupationally exposed to HIV infected blood

- That employers have a legal duty to create a safe, working environment.

It also becomes our responsibility to enlighten our membership, especially those infected that they have protection against victimization as stipulated by:

- **Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998 which** prohibits testing of an employee for HIV without authorisation by the Labour Court. This means employers are required to apply to the Labour Court for a Court Order granting permission to test for HIV before requiring employees to submit to such a test.
- **Section 7(2) of the Act which states that** "Testing of an employee to determine that employee's HIV status is prohibited unless such testing is determined justifiable by the Labour Court in terms of section 50(4)."
- **Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, No.108 of 1996 which** provides that every person has the right to privacy and bodily integrity. This means that no person may be treated (including HIV testing) without informed consent and they have the right to privacy regarding their HIV status.

Indeed all of us have rights and are protected but what about our responsibilities both as individuals and as responsible citizens? Truth

of the matter is, if we intend creating an AIDS free generation, we all have to play a meaningful role in:

(a) Social mobilisation to promote and reinforce healthy behaviours and to discourage behaviours such as substance abuse, gender-based violence, and inter-generational sex. Sonke masibambisane ekuqedeni imikhuba emibi emakhaya ethu.

(b) Addressing gender-based violence as part of a national strategy linked to HIV prevention programmes;

(c) Empowering women and girls at all levels of society, complemented by a much greater focus on male involvement and responsibility for sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention and support;

(e) Communicating the risk of having concurrent partners. Isikhathi samasoka sesidlulile, kuyafiwa manje.

Lastly, dear Comrades, I invite you to join us as **Pharmacovigilance** cadres, an exercise of science related to the detection, assessment, understanding and prevention of adverse effects, particularly long term and short term effects of medicines that gets given to our unsuspecting patients. As healthcare providers we are the ones better placed to:

- Identify new information about hazards associated with medicines
- Prevent harm to patients.

Health workers are the frontlines of health, administering and often prescribing medicines, particularly in health care settings. We are thus well positioned to monitor drug effects and side effects and must be vigilant for signs of counterfeiting such as improper packaging and labeling.

Our patients have trust and confidence in us; it is our duty to uphold that trust. By targeting counterfeit medicines, you can help ensure the safety of patients and restore the public's trust in health care systems.

Masizithande. Sikhulise abantwana bethu ngendlela. Obaba mabavikele amakhosikazi abo baphinde bondle nabantwana babo.

Phambili ngempilo engcono kuwo wonke umuntu.

I thank you.